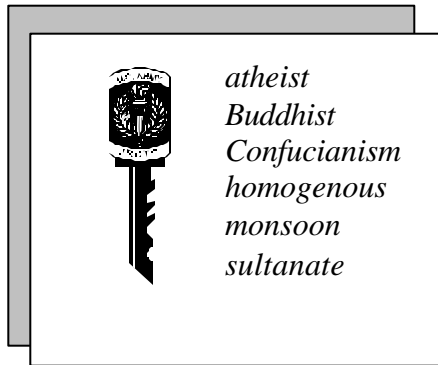
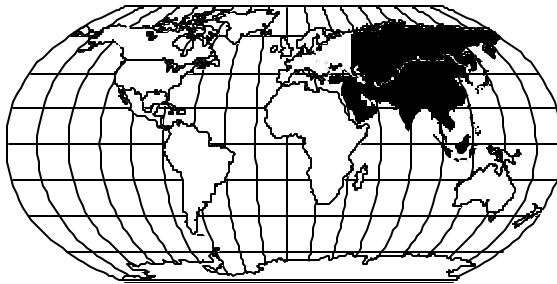


LESSON 5: ASIA — THE LARGEST, MOST POPULOUS CONTINENT



INTRODUCTION



At over 17 million square miles, Asia is the largest continent possessing more than a third of the world's total land. A sprawling realm of diverse terrain and climate, it is also the most populated continent with more than 3 billion people or 60 percent of the Earth's population. Site of some the earliest civilizations, today Asia is a complex mosaic of languages, races, religions, and politics. Although over half of Asia's land is claimed by only 2 countries, China and the Asian portion of Russia, 46 countries make up the remaining half (Illustration 5.5.1).

The Asian landscape (Illustration 5.5.2) is full of extremes and record-breaking measurements. Stretching 1,500 miles across the continent is the highest mountain system in the world, the Himalayas. They

rise over 29,000 feet at Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, and include the Karakoram Range among others. The Hindu Kush, the world's second highest mountain range, is an extension of the Himalaya Mountain System. Other important mountain ranges in Asia include the Tien Shan and Altai.

DID YOU KNOW?

The 28 highest mountains in the world are in Asia, with the 10 highest located in the Himalayas.

Other highlands in Asia include the Plateaus of Mongolia and Tibet. At an average altitude of 13,000 feet, the Plateau of Tibet is the world's highest plateau, covering almost one million square miles. On another plateau ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 feet in altitude is the Gobi Desert, which covers almost 500,000 square miles.

In contrast, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on Earth at 1,312 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea is one of the most saline lakes in the world, and contains no life.

Two other important Asian lakes are Lake Baykal, the deepest lake in the world with a maximum depth of 5,315 feet, and the Aral Sea. Once the world's fourth largest lake, it is now less than half its original size because of water diversion for cotton irrigation.

The rivers in Asia play an important role in ancient history as well as in the lives of Asians today. Many of the world's first great civilizations developed in the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, Indus, and Huang He (Yellow) Rivers. Three of the

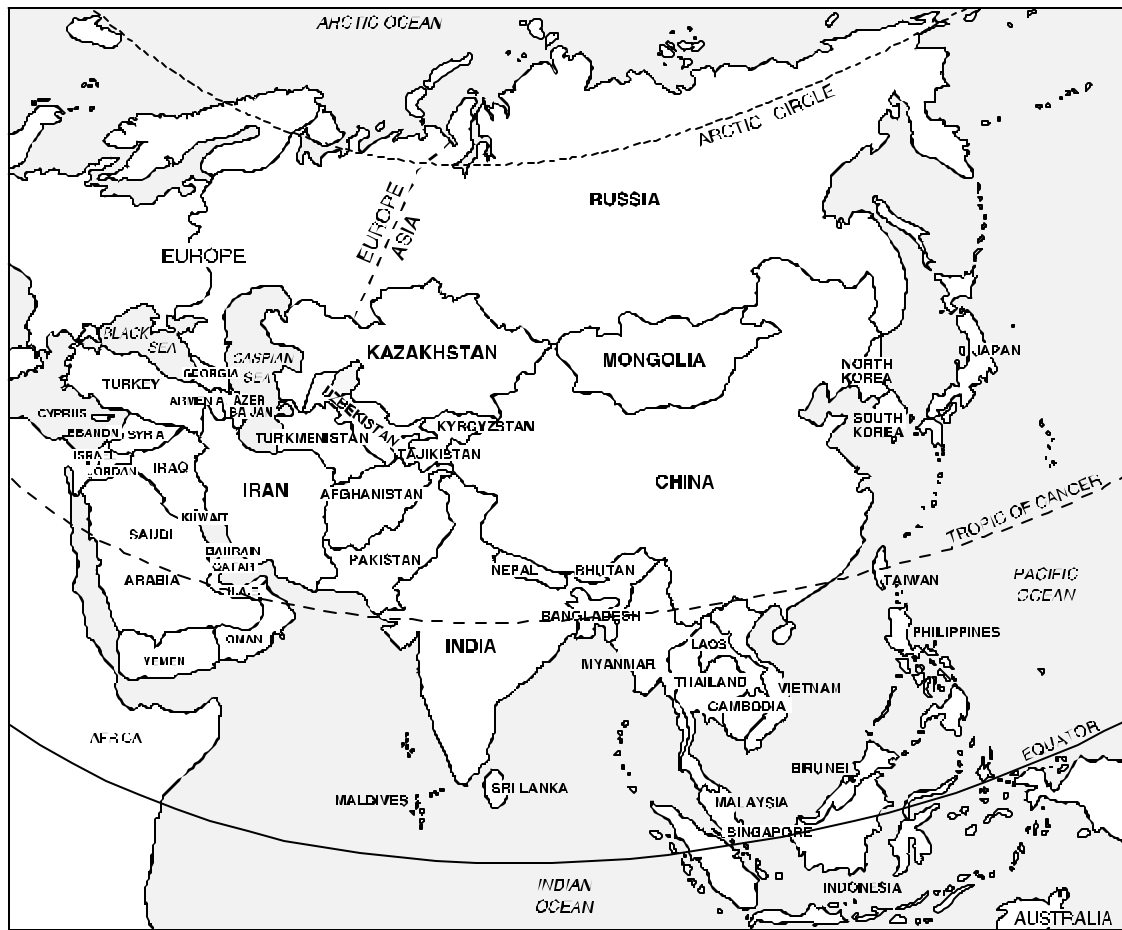


Illustration 5.5.1 — Asian Countries

greatest population densities in the world are along the Ganges, Yangtze, and Huang He Rivers. Other rivers of note include the Mekong, Amur, Lena, Yenisey, and Ob. The latter three rivers are in Siberia, a vast region of Asian Russia known for its harsh climate and used as a prison colony.

Other important geographic regions of Asia include the Arabian, Kamchatka, and Malay Peninsulas, and Asia Minor, a peninsula that forms Asian Turkey.

IMPORTANT HISTORICAL/POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Asia was the birthplace of great civilizations, religions, and philosophy. The Chinese, Indians, and Muslims made major contributions to medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and literature. The Japanese developed a strict military code of behavior. At its peak (750 to 1200 A.D.) the Muslim Empire under the control of the Turks and the Arabs, stretched across northern Africa, Mediterranean, and southeastern Europe, southwestern Asia and parts of India acted as a buffer between Christian Europe and eastern Asia until the 1400s when Europeans found a sea route around Africa.

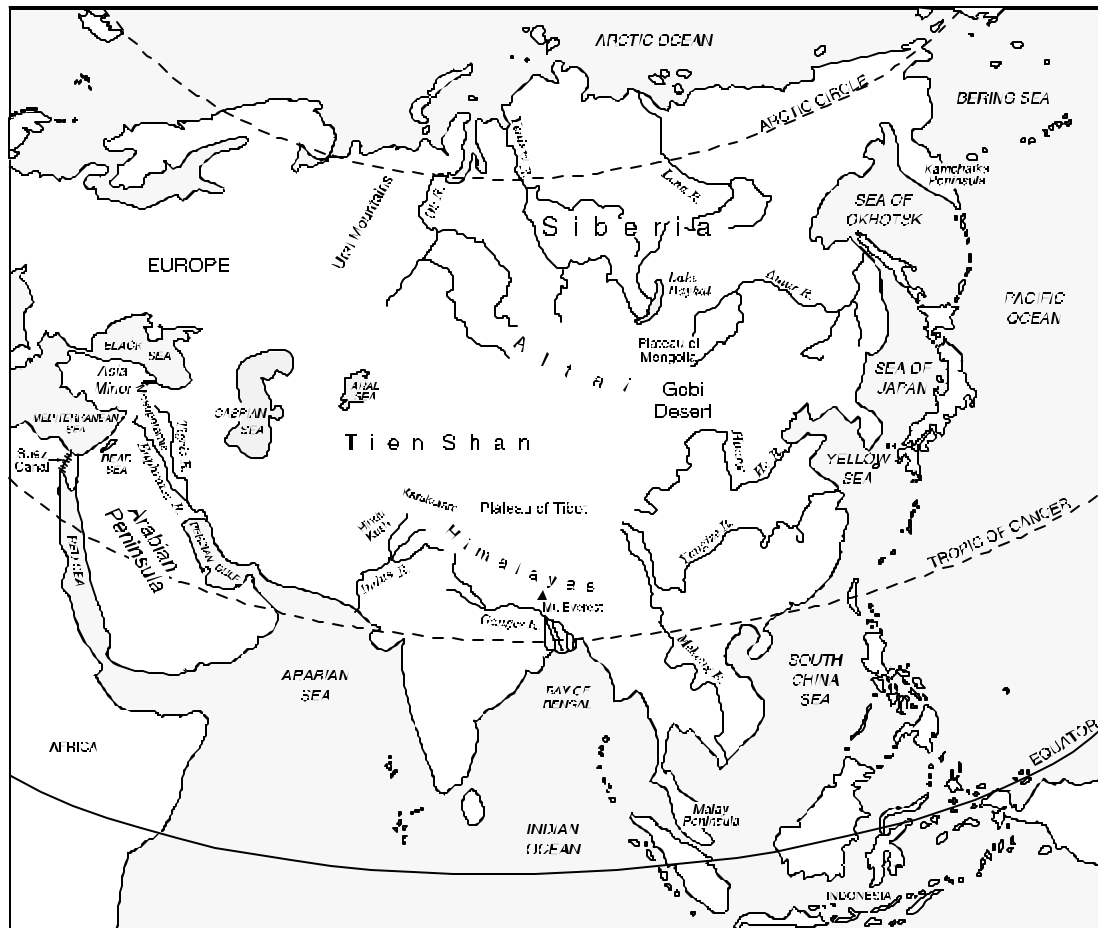


Illustration 5.5.2 — Asian Terrain

After the 1500s, European colonialism, as well as Russian and Japanese expansion greatly affected the borders within Asia. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, aided this expansion by providing easier access to eastern Asia. Following World War II, foreign influence in Asia gave way to Asian nationalism with many countries gaining their independence. However, a return to self-rule in Asia was not without problems, and political, ethnic, and religious conflicts erupted — among them the Korean, Vietnam, Arab-Israeli, and Iran-Iraq Wars. Conflicts still affect many Asian countries today.

RUSSIA, CENTRAL ASIA, AND TRANSCAUCASIA

This region (Illustration 5.5.3) includes all the former Soviet Socialist Republics in Asia: Russia, the central Asian republics, and the three republics of Transcaucasia (the area south of the Caucasus Mountains and north of Turkey and Iran.) In Asian Russia, the West Siberian Lowlands extend from the Ural Mountains to the Yenisey River. The Central Siberian Plateau then extends to the Lena River.

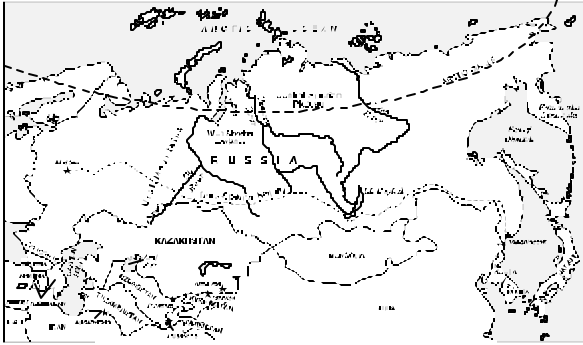


Illustration 5.5.3

The five central Asian republics are located east of the Caspian Sea. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are mountainous. Kazakhstan, the second largest republic of the former U.S.S.R. at over one million square miles, is steppe land (prairie) and desert. Most of Uzbekistan is a sandy plain, and desert covers 80 percent of Turkmenistan. Much of the area experiences very hot summers and freezing winters.

Much milder weather exists in the small, mountainous republics of Transcaucasia (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). Note that Armenia splits Azerbaijan into two parts.

PEOPLE

Like the countries of eastern Europe, the countries of this region possess a mix of ethnic groups. (For Russia, refer to the section on European Russia which covers both European and Asian Russians.) The population of the central Asian republics is a mix of Kazahks, Russians, Germans, Ukrainians, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen. In Transcaucasia, Armenia's population is mostly Armenian with Azeri, Kurd, and Russian minorities, while Azerbaijan is mostly Azeri with Russian and Armenian minorities. In Georgia, the population is mostly Georgian with other minorities.

Most Georgians and Armenians are Christian; Kazakhstan is a mix of Christians and Muslims; and the people of the remaining republics are mostly Muslim. Ethnic and religious conflicts, as well as conflicts over territory, have occurred in this region as late as the 1990s.

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all have languages of Turkic origin. The official languages of Armenia and Georgia are Armenian and Georgian, and the official language of Tajikistan is Tajik, a Persian (Iranian) language.

ECONOMY

Siberia in Asian Russia has a wealth of natural resources, including oil, natural gas, forest, and precious metals. In the past, forced labor and population resettlement to Siberia increased mining and industrial development where Siberians still remove gold, diamonds, gas, and oil from the frozen land today. In the warm climate of Transcaucasia, there are tropical fruits, cotton, tobacco, grain, and olives, as well as mineral resources.

DID YOU KNOW?

Russians built the Trans-Siberian Railway from 1891 to 1905 to encourage development in Siberia. The trip from Moscow to Vladivostok is 5,786 miles, takes seven days, and crosses seven time zones.

In the central Asian republics, there are coal deposits, oil, natural gas, and mineral resources. In the past, Soviet planners dictated industrial development of the area and invested in irrigation for the growth of cotton crops. While the area still

has oil refining, gas extraction, mining, and cotton as major industries, the Soviet's development plans have left many environmental problems, including the shrinking of the Aral Sea.

SOUTHWEST ASIA: THE MIDDLE EAST

Loosely defined, the term Middle East refers to the Arab countries east of the Mediterranean Sea and on the Arabian Peninsula, and includes Turkey and Cyprus and the countries of north Africa (discussed later in lesson about Africa). Characteristics of the Middle East include vast oil reserves, a desert environment, and the Islamic religion, which heavily influences life in much of the region. Bahrain, made up of 35 islands in the Persian Gulf, is the smallest country in the Asian part of the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia is the largest covering four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula.

With the exception of coastal areas, most of the peninsula is flat desert. Iran and Turkey, however, are more mountainous. The Tigris-Euphrates River valley is fertile area in the Middle East's arid landscape. Most of the region receives less than 10 inches of rain a year, and there are frequent sandstorms.

An important waterway in this region is the Strait of Hormuz through which ships must pass to reach the oil terminals in the Persian Gulf. The strait was the location of international tension during the Iran-Iraq and Gulf Wars. Jutting into the strait is a peninsula belonging to Oman but separated from it by the United Arab Emirates. Another location of conflict in this region is Israel, a Jewish state in an Islamic world.

Important Middle Eastern cities include:

- Jerusalem on the border of Israel and the Israeli-occupied West Bank of Jordan, a holy city for Jews, Muslims, and Christians
- Jericho in the Israeli-occupied West Bank of Jordan, site of the world's oldest known settlement dating from 9000 B.C.
- Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Mohammed and Islam's holiest city, which is closed to non-Muslims
- Istanbul, Turkey, formerly Constantinople, the only city in the world on two continents.

PEOPLE

A majority of Middle Easterners are Arabic-speaking Muslim Arabs. Exceptions include:

- Sizable Christian populations in Cyprus and Lebanon, and a Jewish majority in Israel
- Turkish and Greek spoken in Cyprus, Turkish spoken in Turkey, Farsi (Persian) spoken in Iran, Hebrew spoken in Israel
- A Persian (Iranian) majority in Iran, a Turkish majority in Turkey, and large Kurdish minorities in Iraq and Turkey. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without their own state. Often politically oppressed and persecuted, they fight and negotiate for an independent Kurdish state.

Many problems in the Middle East have occurred because of these ethnic and religious differences. In Cyprus, the Turkish part of the island declared independence in 1983. In Lebanon, a civil war between Christians and Muslims started in 1975 and lasted almost 15 years. After World War I, Palestine (a holy land for Jews, Muslims,

and Christians) came under British supervision. After World War II, most of Palestine became the Jewish homeland of Israel, and Arabs living in Palestine, or Palestinians, became refugees in neighboring countries. In the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, Israel occupied and held the remaining Palestinian territory belonging to Egypt (Gaza Strip), Syria (Golan Heights), and Jordan (West Bank). As of 1999, although negotiations for a peaceful solution are ongoing, animosity between Israelis and Palestinians continues in the form of terrorist and retaliatory activities.

ECONOMY

Many countries in the Middle East have economies based on oil production, making them some of the world's richest countries. Bahrain is a major center for oil trading, banking, and commerce. Iraq and Iran are two of the world's largest producers of oil, but recent wars have disrupted production. Oil provides 95 percent of Kuwait's government revenue and 90 percent of Oman's. Qatar's off-shore oil makes up an eighth of the world's known reserves; reserves in Saudi Arabia, the world's leading oil exporter, account for a fourth of the world's known oil supply. Syria and the United Arab Emirates also have economies based on oil. To avoid relying too heavily on oil income, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, are attempting to diversify their economies.

In the remaining countries, light manufacturing and agriculture are major economic activities. Tourism is important in Cyprus, Israel, and Turkey. Lebanon, once a commercial and financial center, is attempting to revive its economy devastated by civil war.

SOUTH ASIA: THE TRIANGULAR SUBCONTINENT

The countries of south Asia are on or near the triangular peninsula known as the Indian subcontinent (Illustration 5.5.5). Characteristics of this region include thousands of small villages, as well as large, overpopulated cities, much poverty and underdevelopment, and intense faith in various religions. Mountains outline the region. The Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalayas in the north spread across Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal, and part of Pakistan and India. The much smaller mountains of the Western and Eastern Ghats ranges dot the southwest and southeast coasts of India, with the Deccan Plateau, noted for its cotton, lying between them.

The Thar Desert covers 125,000 square miles in northwest India and east Pakistan. In the mostly desert country of Pakistan, the Indus River helps irrigate crops. Crossed by the Brahmaputra and Ganges Rivers, Bangladesh, which is flat and low-lying, is subject to frequent flooding. The Maldives are also low-lying, and only 202 of its 1,190 islands have inhabitants.

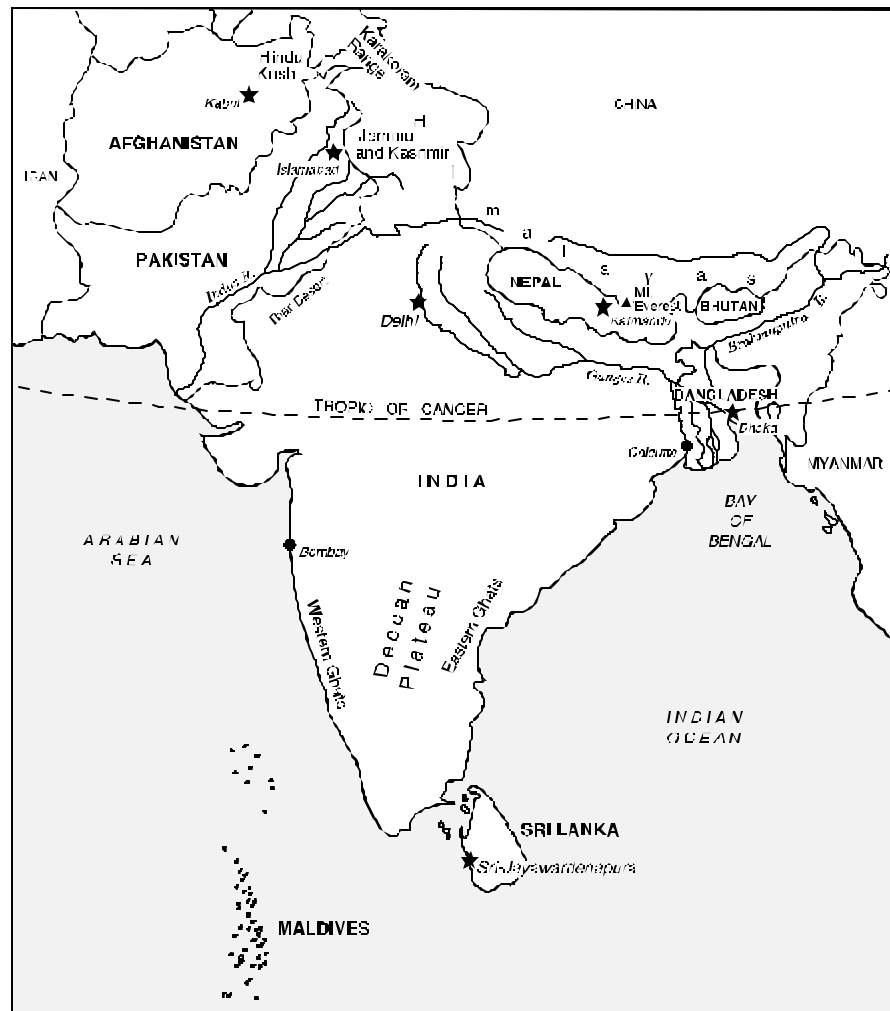


Illustration 5.5.5 — South Asia

PEOPLE

More than one billion people live in South Asia, which has the world's second largest population cluster. India's population of 890 million is greater than that of Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa combined. In Bangladesh, more than 120 million people live in an area the size of Iowa, which, by comparison, has less than 3 million inhabitants.

Many of the people on the Indian subcontinent are of Dravidian and/or Aryan descent. The Dravidians were original inhabitants of the region, and the Aryans

were invaders. Most people of Dravidian origin live in south India and Sri Lanka. People of Aryan descent live in northern India, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. The Nepalese of Nepal are a mix of Aryan and Mongolian blood.

Many of the languages spoken are Indo-Aryan. They include, among others, Hindi, Bengali, Nepali, and Sinhalese. Afghanistan's official languages are Iranian-related, and Bhutan's is a variant of Tibetan. Since much of this region was once a British colony, English is also widely spoken here.

Islam is the major religion in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Pakistan. There are **Buddhist** majorities in Bhutan and Sri Lanka, and Hindu majorities in India and Nepal. Racial and religious hostilities exist between Hindu and Muslim animosity in Kashmir (officially Jammu and Kashmir), an Indian-administered state claimed by both Pakistan and India.

ECONOMY

As previously indicated, south Asia is a very crowded part of the world, and innovations in health and medicine continue to increase population growth. The amount of cultivated land per person continues to decline. Farming methods are inefficient, and there are food shortages. Many people in this underdeveloped region live in hunger and poverty.

Agriculture is the main economic activity in south Asia, in some countries employing as much as 90 percent of the population. Rice is an important food crop, growing well in south Asia's famous **monsoon** climate. Other crops include wheat, sugarcane, coffee, tea, spices, corn, and jute, a native south Asian plant with fibers used in burlap, sacking, twine, rope, and insulation.

Manufacturing of textiles, especially cotton products, is important in this region. In India, industrial production has increased considerably since independence, and tourism is expanding in the Himalayan countries.

SOUTHEAST ASIA: PENINSULAS AND ISLANDS

Southeast Asia (Illustration 5.5.6) is a region fragmented into peninsulas and islands. Indonesia is the region's largest country and the world's greatest archipelago, made up of more than 13,000 islands and stretching for almost 3,500 miles. Over 6,000 of these islands have inhabitants. The main islands are Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi, the western part of New Guinea called Irian Jaya (the eastern part, Papua New Guinea, is considered part of Oceania), and the southern part of Borneo (Kalimantan). The northern part of Borneo mostly belongs to Malaysia except for the small country of Brunei, an Islamic **sultanate** far from the Middle East. The Philippines is also a country of islands — more than 7,100. The Malay Peninsula forms part of Thailand and Malaysia, with the island country of Singapore at its southern tip. Important rivers cross the region's mainland countries: the Ayeyarwady (formerly Irrawaddy), the Mekong, and the Red. Many people in this region live in the valleys surrounding these rivers. Mountains and thick tropical forests cover much of the rest of southeast Asia making human settlement difficult. Many of Indonesia's peaks are actually volcanoes. Indonesia has 77 active volcanoes, more than any country in the world.

PEOPLE

In southeast Asia, the Burmans make up the majority of the population in Myanmar (formerly Burma), the Malays make up the majority in Brunei and Malaysia. Other people groups in the region include the following: the Khmer or Cambodians in

Cambodia; the Laotians (related to the Thai) in Laos; the Filipino in the Philippines; the Thai or Siamese in Thailand (formerly Siam); the Vietnamese in Vietnam; and the Chinese in Singapore. The Chinese also make up large minorities throughout the area. Indonesia is a mix of many ethnic groups.

Languages in the region include Burmese, Malay, Khmer, Bahasa Indonesian, Lao, Pilipino, Thai, and Vietnamese. In Singapore, the chief languages are English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. English and French are also widely spoken

in many of these countries because of their colonial heritage, and Indonesia has more than 250 different languages spoken.

Indonesia and Brunei are predominantly Muslim; Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand are predominantly Buddhist; and the Philippines is 83 percent Roman Catholic. The populations of Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam practice several different religions. Buddhism was the chief religion in Cambodia until the Khmer Rouge (communist revolutionaries) outlawed religion in 1975.



Illustration 5.5.6 — South Asia

ECONOMY

Southeast Asia is an underdeveloped region of the world. The economies in most of these countries depend largely on agriculture with rice, sugarcane, tobacco, and rubber as important crops. Java's rich volcanic soil makes it one of the most agriculturally productive places on Earth.

Brunei is a large oil producer, and oil and natural gas from Borneo and Sumatra account for 60 percent of Indonesia's income. Singapore, a major shipping center, is southeast Asia's most developed country. It has a diversified industrial economy with a well-educated workforce. In contrast, Laos

Considering southeast Asia's geography, fishing is also a profitable economic activity. Tourism is important in the more politically stable countries.

EASTERN ASIA: CHINA, JAPAN, AND NEIGHBORS

Territorially, China dominates eastern Asia (Illustration 5.5.7). Twenty-two provinces and five autonomous regions cover the country's 3,700,000 square miles. Tibet is home to the Plateau of Tibet and is known as the "roof of the world." It is an autonomous region, as is Inner Mongolia, an area of desert and semi-desert, are two of the autonomous regions. They are part of the

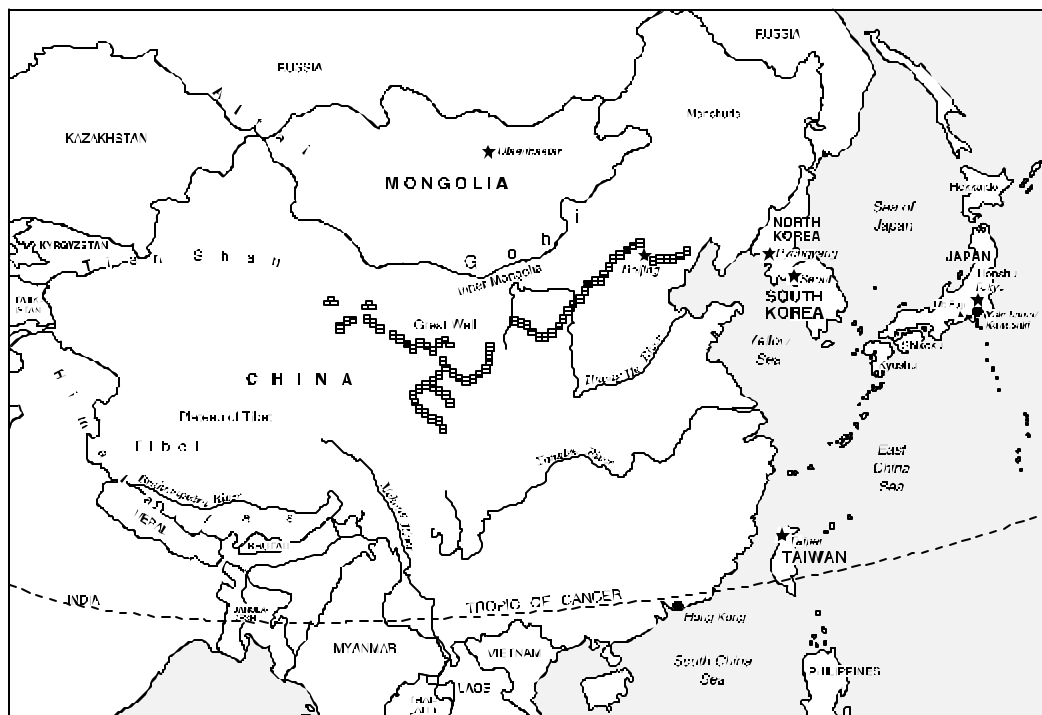


Illustration 5.5.7 — Eastern Asia

has little industry, no railroads, few paved roads, and is this region's poorest country, and in many parts of the Philippines, major overpopulation contributes to poverty and malnutrition.

western two-thirds of China, which is mountainous, sparsely populated, and arid. The remaining third of the country along the east coast is heavily populated, fertile, and flat.

Mongolia, a large desert country, lies to China's north. Taiwan, an island of less than 14,000 square miles, lies 80 miles off the southeast coast of China. Taiwan is two-thirds mountains and crossed by the Tropic of Cancer. Japan is also an island country. Despite having a total area less than the size of California, Japan is politically and economically powerful. Its four largest islands are Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku. The islands are mountainous with 54 active volcanoes.

DID YOU KNOW?

To combat overpopulation, China has a population policy that limits most families to only one child. Many Chinese understand their country's population problem and willingly comply with the policy.

To Japan's west on a peninsula bordering northeastern China are North (communist) and South (democratic) Korea. A 487 square mile demilitarized zone separates them from each other. South Korea has hot summers and cold winters, while the more mountainous North Korea experiences warm summers and severely cold winters. Typhoons, or hurricanes that form over the Pacific Ocean, bring heavy rains to Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and southeast China in late summer and early fall.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Great Wall of China, built between 221 B.C. and the 1600s to repel invaders, is over 1,500 miles long and an average of 25 feet high and 12 feet wide.

IMPORTANT

HISTORICAL/POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The two political giants in east Asia are China and Japan. In fact, the remaining countries in the region have

been under either Japanese or Chinese control, or both, at one time or another in their past. When the communist government took over China in 1949, the nationalist government moved to Taiwan and founded the Republic of China. Today, Taiwan continues to proclaim its independence from China, and China continues to claim Taiwan.

PEOPLE

With almost 1.2 billion people, China has the greatest population of any country in the world. By contrast, the United States, which is only slightly smaller in size than China, has only 252 million people. One out of every five people on Earth lives in China, most of them in the east.

For their size, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have some of the greatest population densities in the world. In contrast, Mongolia is the world's emptiest country with little over 2 million people spread out over 1.5 million square miles. Mongolia's population is 90 percent Mongol, descended from nomadic tribes in Mongolia and southern Siberia with a reputation for skilled warfare and horsemanship. Many Mongols also live in China's Inner Mongolia.

Mongolia's official language is Khalkha Mongol, and its chief religion is Buddhism.

The Chinese make up the majority of the populations in Taiwan and China, but China also has over 50 different minorities. Mandarin Chinese is the chief language in both countries, but China has many other dialects. Minority languages are spoken here as well. China is officially an **atheist** country, but many Chinese follow **Confucianism**, Buddhism, and Taoism (a philosophy and religion that teaches harmony between the individual and the natural world).

Despite the border that divides them, the people of North and South Korea have the same ancestry, language, religion, and until recently, history. Both countries have Korean majorities, and Korean is their official language. Buddhism and Confucianism, as well as Christianity, are some of the religions practiced in South Korea. Although Buddhism and Confucianism are also practiced in North Korea, religious activities there are minimal.

Japan's society is very different from the other countries in this region. It is both modern and traditional. With a population over 99 percent Japanese, it has few minorities and is one of the most **homogeneous** populations of its size in the world. Japanese is Japan's official language, and its chief religions are Buddhism and Shintoism, an ancient native religion that incorporates features of Buddhism and also involves reverence to Japanese ancestors.

ECONOMY

Japan is one of the world's industrial and technological giants. Since it has limited natural resources, it buys raw materials and sells finished products worldwide. These products include, among many others, electrical goods, electronics, automobiles, cameras, and film. The country also supplies engineering and financial services, as well as information technology. Agriculture in Japan is very efficient and productive, even though less than 20 percent of Japanese land is under cultivation. There is intensive crop production of rice, and other economic activities include timber and fishing.

Taiwan is another country that has few raw materials but is still very successful in manufacturing. Following Japan's lead, the country is now switching to high technology.

Unlike Japan and Taiwan, China is rich in natural resources. China's heavy industry produces iron, steel, coal, machinery, and armaments. More recently, the country is turning to light industry, like household goods, and is attempting to disperse factories and manufacturing into its interior. To feed its large population, China uses agricultural technology and diversifies crops to increase food production.

Regarding North and South Korea, most of the mineral wealth is in the north. South Korea, however, has one of the world's largest deposits of tungsten, a metal used in light bulb filaments and steel. North Korea is especially rich in iron and coal and has more heavy industry than South Korea. South Korea, which has a more rapidly growing economy, produces light consumer products but is shifting to heavy industry. Only about 20 percent of the total land in

both countries is good for agriculture, and fishing is an important economic activity.

Mongolia is the least industrialized country in this region and relies on raising livestock and processing animal products for its income. Some cultivation of its arid land is possible with irrigation.
